

Ford Madox Ford: Autobiography, Urban Space, Agoraphobia

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Some time in late 1898 or early 1899 Ford Madox Ford came across Émile Zola seated on a bench in Hyde Park. Ford, still in his mid-twenties, was already a published biographer, novelist and poet. Zola, who died in 1902, was in his late fifties. He had fled to London after being convicted of criminal libel for his role in the Dreyfus Affair and sentenced to prison. On Zola's previous visit to the city, in September 1893, he had been positively feted: "The Lord Mayor received him at the Guildhall; an elaborate firework display illuminated his portrait in the sky above the Crystal Palace; and editors and writers hosted soirées in his honour" (Cummins 130). At one point, he was conducted on a gruesome tour of the scenes of Jack the Ripper's crimes in Whitechapel. "As to London, which I visited for the first time," he told the *Guardian* on his return to Paris on that occasion, "the big city made an indelible impression on my mind. Its beauty is not in its monuments, but in its immensity; the colossal character of its quays and bridge, to which ours are as toys" ("Émile Zola Interviewed"). This time, exiled from his homeland, the city's immensity did not have the same exhilarating effect on him. He arrived at Victoria Station, with almost no possessions, in July 1898. Soon after he left London on a series of "suburban peregrinations" that his friends insisted would help him "achieve total obscurity" (Brown 752). He spent an anxious few months in England, sporadically afflicted by nervous seizures.

Ford recalls the occasion on which he happened upon Zola in Hyde Park in his autobiographical memoir, *Return to Yesterday* (1931). There he records that Zola "had been gazing gloomily at the ground and poking the sand with the end of his cane" (*Return* 214). "No gloom could have ever been greater than his," he adds in a drily melancholic tone (*Return* 214). According to Ford, Zola listlessly complained that on the ground beside the bench, in the course of the morning, he had found as many as eighteen hairpins carelessly dropped by negligent nursemaids: "A city so improvident must be doomed" (*Return* 214). Ford, who appears to relish the precision of the number eighteen, implies that this behaviour is positively compulsive. "He had, at any rate during that stay in London, many phobias," he continues (*Return* 214). Ford then proceeds to describe another occasion, presumably at about this time, when a mutual acquaintance asked him to convey Zola to some address in a hansom cab. Zola scarcely spoke during the journey, on the assumption that Ford could not speak French. "But eventually I found that he was counting the numbers of the registration plates of the cabs that were in front of us," Ford notes:

If the added digits came to nine – or possibly to seven – he was momentarily elated; if they came to some inauspicious number – to thirteen I suppose – he would be prolongedly depressed. (*Return* 214)

Ford thus reads Zola reading the occult signs of the modern city. The scattered hairpins that Zola had counted beneath the park bench, oddly intimate domestic detritus that has spilt out from the private recesses of the metropolis into its public space, seem potentially meaningful. They are both a kind of statistic, the indices of

improvidence, and the residue of innumerable untold stories. In contrast, the number plates are merely random codes. The hairpins have narrative significance; the number plates do not. It is the difference, to put it schematically, between a naturalist and a modernist semiotics of the city.

The anecdote about the hansom cab is comic as well as tragic in its outline. It is amusing in particular to picture Ford silently attempting to infer Zola's numerological system – which in both the more and less strict senses of the term is idiotic – from his reactions to the number plates he sees in the traffic. Ford's eyes must have flickered incessantly between Zola's enigmatic face and the meaningless numbers on the hansom cabs themselves. In this respect, though, Ford's behaviour is almost as compulsive as Zola's. Paradoxically, one can detect Ford's slightly obsessive investment in Zola's mental processes in the apparent imprecision with which he pinpoints the number that makes his companion elated: "If the added digits came to nine – or possibly to seven –." The presence of that "possibly" signals that, for Ford, there is a difference. As the hesitant, ruminative syntax of this sentence indicates, it matters to him whether it is seven or nine. Indeed, it is as if more than three decades later he is still trying to crack the code. Ford too, in short, is secretly a numerologist. He is in this respect Zola's double. It might even be speculated, though, that Zola's numerological compulsion – one of numerous phobias that this anecdote is intended to exemplify – is actually a fantastical projection of Ford's. There is no positive evidence that the fleeting expressions of elation and depression inscribed on Zola's face have anything to do with the number plates. He might be gazing into space and making purely introspective calculations. The exiled intellectual might simply be sifting through memories, thinking of his family or his mistress, or contemplating his return to Paris.

So Ford is a distinctly unreliable narrator. Of course, Impressionism, the literary aesthetic with which he was so closely associated, is all about unreliable narration. It is premised on the assumption that, in the act of representation, it is the subject as opposed to the object that is important; or, more particularly, that it is the relationship between them, the process of representation, which imparts meaning to a narrative, so that finally, folded in on one another, subject and object cease to have independent significance. Impressionism hypostasizes the partial or unreliable narrator, as Ford's most celebrated novel, *The Good Soldier* (1915), makes creepingly apparent. "The Impressionist author is sedulous to avoid letting his personality appear in the course of his book," Ford once asserted; "On the other hand, his whole book, his whole poem is merely an expression of his personality" ("On Impressionism" 265). *Return to Yesterday*, for its part, is an overtly impressionistic retrospective. In its "Dedication", Ford explicitly describes it as "a novel" rather than an autobiography:

Where it has seemed expedient to me I have altered episodes that I have witnessed but I have been careful never to distort the character of the episode. The accuracies I deal in are the accuracies of my impressions. (*Return* 4)

It should be no surprise, therefore, if these anecdotes about Zola in London tell us less about the French novelist than about Ford himself.

But in addition to these external reasons, there is another reason, one internal to the text, for thinking that Ford is consciously or unconsciously projecting onto Zola. If he identifies the numbers that cause Zola to feel elated with an exactitude that is only underlined by his refusal definitely to commit either to nine or seven, he is

unexpectedly casual when he comes to identify the numbers that cause him to feel depressed – “if they came to some inauspicious number – to thirteen I suppose – he would be prolongedly depressed.” This is an oddly imprecise assessment. Did he or did he not succeed in ascertaining the number that upset Zola? It is of course possible that, in spite of his manifest ability to recollect the positive numbers, he has simply forgotten the negative one. The careless tone of the sentence – “thirteen I suppose” – is however suspicious. It seems disingenuous. But perhaps this author too, in reading Ford reading Zola reading the numbers, has been infected by the paranoiac hermeneutic that Umberto Eco has brilliantly analysed as “over-interpretation” (see Eco). After all, the number thirteen is a proverbial object of superstition. Ford did not however cite the number thirteen simply because it is conventionally assumed to be inauspicious. He himself suffered from a superstitious fear of the number thirteen; that is, from triskaidekaphobia.

Ford moved from Sussex back to London at the end of 1903, at the time he was writing *The Soul of London* (1905), his extraordinary impressionist account of the metropolis; and it is from that moment, it seems, that the psychological crisis whose effects he suffered throughout his life commenced. In both his professional and his domestic life he was afflicted by problems: he could not find a publisher for the book about London; his relations with Joseph Conrad, and the literary collaborations on which they were working, were severely affected by the older novelist’s depression; his marriage to Elsie appeared to be on the point of implosion; he caught the influenza then raging through London; and, as if all this was insufficiently dramatic, on one spectacular occasion, as he arrived home, Ford opened his front door to discover his eldest daughter, Christina, who was six or seven years old, fleeing downstairs with her clothes and hair on fire. All of these contingent factors, in addition to other, perhaps congenital ones, no doubt contributed, in 1904, to what his most authoritative biographer has characterised as a “devastating mental breakdown” (Saunders 164). “The move to London was for me the beginning of a series of disasters,” Ford writes in *Return to Yesterday*: “That was perhaps because the year was 1903. Those digits added up to thirteen. No one should have done anything in that year” (*Return* 174).

This camp overstatement is undoubtedly comic, but Ford is deadly serious. The abrupt tone of these sentences, in an autobiography that, at some deep, disturbing level, probes the parallels between his personal crisis of 1904 and the public crisis of 1914, is apocalyptic rather than mock-heroic: “These were the early days of that mania that has since beset the entire habitable globe” (*Return* 204). Later in the memoir, Ford comments, “I have always been superstitious myself and so remain – impenitently”:

Each month at the turn of the moon I go to great trouble not to see the new moon through glass and I prefer to be in a house that does not face towards the West. Nothing will make me go under a ladder, I cannot bear to sit in a room with three candles or to bring snowdrops, may or marigolds indoors. (*Return* 226)

He defends these superstitions on the grounds that everyone lives their daily lives under the influence of a sense of good or bad luck: “The most rationalist of human beings does not pass his life without saying: ‘I am in luck today!’” (*Return* 226). It is thus a normal rather than deviant characteristic of human nature. He goes on to argue, convincingly enough, that this superstitious perception, of whether one happens to be

lucky or unlucky at a particular time, immaterial as it might appear, has a definite, a measurable effect on one's psychology. When you feel lucky, "you will be resolute, keen, active, awake to proper courses to pursue," and you thereby "ensure luck" (*Return* 226). There is a similarly circular logic to bad luck: "When you are depressed by ill omens you are less resolute, you are despondent in the degree however small of the weight you attach to the beliefs of your fellow man" (*Return* 226).

Ford then gives two examples of runs of poor luck, and of psychological depression, that succeeded some inauspicious incident. He describes the first of these, an incident involving the attempt to rid himself of an opal, which must have taken place in the opening months of 1904, in some detail; and this episode will be examined closely later. He alludes to the second one, which must have happened some time in the late 1920s, more cursorily. He recalls that he was driving in "a closed automobile" in "an open space" in Harlem when one of the car's female passengers suddenly exclaimed, "Look at that immense crescent!" (*Return* 226). "She was indicating the new moon," he explains, "which in consequence I saw through the front glass." He concludes: "From that day for a long time – indeed until about a year ago – I experienced nothing but disaster: in finances, in health, in peace of mind, in ability to work" (*Return* 226). Furthermore, the memory of that moon subsequently makes him incapable of working for several months. This phobia is the cause of agoraphia, an inability to write.

What is interesting about the description is the emphasis on space: Ford was in a closed automobile in an open space in the city. A concern with the disposition of space, and with movement in it, is characteristic throughout his autobiographical memoir (as indeed it is characteristic of all of his writing).¹ This spatial fixation is evident even from the Dedication to *Return to Yesterday*, which addresses his friends Dr Michael and Mrs Eileen Hall Lake. Michael Hall Lake, 'Micky', had bandaged up Ford's foot, and he was convalescing with them when he conceived his memoir. "My Dears," it begins, "It was whilst looking up at the criss-cross beams in the roof of your tall studio that the form of this book was thought out" (*Return* 3). Here is a poetics of space comparable to the one that Gaston Bachelard famously devised, in which the individual's house is a "universe, a real cosmos" (Bachelard 4). Ford goes on to explain the formal analogy between the roof of the studio and the autobiography: "So, as I go through these pages I seem to see that criss-cross in your gracious old house[,] and the literary form of the work is inextricably mingled with those Cubist intricacies" (*Return* 3). This space, multi-faceted, intimate, is cosily familiar. If Ford attempted to reproduce in the form of the memoir a comforting architectural space, then, less consciously perhaps, his writing from the early 1900s reproduced, or negotiated, an alien, alienating, or unfamiliar form of space. It might be said that, in recasting his life until 1914 in the form of this comforting cubistic autobiography, Ford was redeeming the rather different poetics of space that shapes the earlier period.

That poetics of space can be glimpsed in the image of the house on Campden Hill, in Holland Park, that Ford and his wife Elise rented from friends at the end of 1903 and moved into in early January 1904. Initially Ford ascribed the series of disasters that succeeded this move to the fact that the digits that constitute the year 1903 add up to 13. He does however propose an alternative interpretation:

Or it was perhaps because the house I then took was accursed. It was a monstrous sepulchre – and not even whitened. It was grey with the greyness of withered bones. It was triangular in ground plan: the face formed the nose of a

blunted redan, the body tapered to a wedge in which there was a staircase like the corkscrew staircases of the Middle Ages. The façade was thus monstrous, the tail ignoble. It was seven stories in height in those days and in those days elevators in private houses were unknown. It was what housemaids call: 'A Murderer'. (*Return* 174)

In contrast to the canny involutions of space in the Hall Lakes' house, the spatial disposition of this house is distinctly uncanny. Ford deliberately draws on a Gothic register in order to represent it, as in the image of the mediaeval staircase, which seems to have been transposed from the Castle of Udolpho. It is a haunted house. Even the housemaids' phrase for it, "A Murderer", which refers colloquially to the murderous demands of the staircases that they constantly had to escalate in order to attend to their duties, assumes more sinister overtones – it is as if the house itself, with its violently angular features, assumes the anthropomorphic qualities of a psychopath. Ford blames the house for "the chain of disasters, suicides, bankruptcies and despairs that visited its successive tenants and owners" (*Return* 174). The house is cursed. This is perhaps an instance, then, of what Anthony Vidler has called "the architectural uncanny" (Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny* 17-44). And Ford manifestly suffers what might be characterised as a spatial phobia, or topophobic anxiety, in relation to it. The metropolis itself at this time he described as "that London mausoleum of 1903" (*Return* 208).

The third and last anecdote that Ford relates about Zola in *Return to Yesterday* restages this anxiety about space, both exterior and interior, in the form of a French farce. "He had a singular misadventure in a house a few yards from the one I then inhabited on Campden Hill," he reports in a humorous tone that belies his identification with "the unfortunate Frenchman" (*Return* 215). The editor of a right-wing literary journal has invited Zola to dinner at his house in order to convince him of the delights of "English home life"; it takes Zola more than three hours to arrive, however, because he mistakenly travels to Camden Town, "a poor quarter, nine miles or so from the lordly Hill" (*Return* 215).

The house to which he was invited was in darkness and he spent more time in the shrubbery in the front garden. When he reached the front door he found it open and myopically entered the dark hall. He was normally very short-sighted and at the time was suffering from something like conjunctivitis so that he had to wear black spectacles. (*Return* 215)

Zola is then abruptly confronted by a woman in "curl-papers" and a yellow "bed-wrap", who calls from the landing above him: "William! When are you coming to bed?" (*Return* 215). Zola, lost in the darkness of the hall, tries to escape this "apparition", as Ford calls her. In so doing, ridiculously, he falls over the prostrate body of the editor, who has coincidentally ascended from the cellar, where he had been retrieving a bottle of wine intended to console him for the absence of the celebrated French novelist, and has tripped on a step. "Zola therefore pitched down the steps" of the house, Ford adds, and fled (*Return* 215). If Ford's house on Campden Hill is the stuff of horror, then this one, a few doors away, is the stuff of slapstick humour. In the figure of Zola, Ford replays his tragic relationship to the house in which he lived at the time of his breakdown in terms of farce.

Like Zola, it seems, only far more so, in London Ford suffered from a number of phobias. Of these phobias, agoraphobia was by far the most prominent. "From 1903 to 1906 illness removed me from most activities," as he himself summarises it in *Return to Yesterday*: "I suffered from what was diagnosed as agoraphobia and intense depression" (*Return* 202). "I had nothing specific to be depressed about," he insists, but he admits nonetheless that these years, his "lost years", represented "uninterrupted mental agony" (*Return* 202). Ford's complaint, which in the autobiography he unconvincingly ascribes to intense fatigue, manifested itself in "a slight fluttering of the heart" and a sudden faintness (*Return* 204). "This will naturally sometimes happen in the street," he adds, and "the result therefore a little resembles agoraphobia" (*Return* 204). It happened in empty spaces other than the street, too, so his condition does more than simply resemble agoraphobia. It is a profoundly disabling "movement inhibition", to use Paul Carter's deliberately unspecific definition of agoraphobia (Carter 9). In July 1904, for example, Ford's friend Olive Garnett set off with him on a walk across Salisbury Plain, which was close to a house that he and Elsie had rented, and found him suddenly incapable of proceeding. She later offered a revealing description of this incident in a memorandum:

Ford had an attack of agoraphobia, & said if I didn't take his arm he would fall down. I held on in all the blaze for miles, it seemed to me, but the town reached, he walked off briskly to get tobacco and a shave; and when I pointed this out to Elsie she said 'nerves'. He can't cross wide open spaces. (qtd. in Saunders 171)

Ford spent five months in Germany that same year in an attempt to cure his condition, drifting unhappily from one medical institution to another like some melancholic exile from Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. "Everyone diagnosed my trouble as agoraphobia," he comments with comic bitterness in the autobiography; "sixteen or seventeen of them attributed it to sexual abnormalities and treated me for them" (*Return* 204). In the last institution he attended, the Rhineland Kaltwasser-Heilanstalt, he was put on a diet of pork and ice cream and forced to take iced footbaths. "There's such a lot of nervous breakdown in the land," he declared in a letter to Elsie, half in triumph, half in defeat; "They've a regular name for lack of walking power up here: Platz Angst" (qtd. in Saunders 176).

The German psychologist Carl Otto Westphal first ascribed the name 'agoraphobia' to a fear of open or urban spaces (it applied to both) in 1871. It had however been identified as a distinct neuropathic phenomenon from at least the late 1860s, at the outset of what David Trotter has called "phobia's *belle époque*" (Trotter 463). In his *Die Agoraphobie* (1872), Westphal observed that "for some years patients have repeatedly approached me with the peculiar complaint that it is not possible for them to walk across open spaces and through certain streets and that, due to the fear of such paths, they are troubled in their freedom of movement" (Westphal 59). One example he offered was that of a salesman suffering from this complaint:

For two years now a feeling of fear walking through the streets alone has been accompanying him; in the beginning such walks were almost impossible for him, now he at least tries, but a nibbling feeling in the stomach area, a feeling of paralysis in his arms and legs, as if he could not move, as if he would fall to the ground[,] overcomes him. (Westphal 86)

In France, where it had also been documented since the late 1860s, the psychiatrist Legrand du Saulle referred to agoraphobia as *peur d'espaces*. E. Gélinau, refining the prevailing definition in 1890, insisted for his part on employing the term *kénophobie*, because the condition "strikes only the inhabitant of cities [. . .], developing under the influence of that debilitating atmosphere of the big towns that has been called *malaria urbana*" (qtd. in Vidler, *Psychopathologies* 15). The empty spaces of the metropolis, especially large squares, appear to have been a particular problem for agoraphobics. "Nineteenth-century agoraphobics experienced the gigantic squares and boulevards introduced into their cities as hostile environments," Kathryn Milun has recently stated; "They perceived these monumental spaces as 'empty' and experienced intense anxiety that caused them to retreat to the curb, to their homes, and even to bed" (Milun 2). (This is reminiscent of Ford's image of Zola marooned on that park bench in London, oppressed perhaps by the "immensity" of a city whose "colossal character" he had once admired.)

Agoraphobia is not exclusively an urban psychopathology, as the example of Ford's collapse on Salisbury Plain implies, but its emergence is indeed arguably inseparable from a certain experience of the city in the nineteenth century. Ford seems to have been conscious of this. In *Return to Yesterday* he writes that "at the beginning of the century it would have taken you 247 years walking at four miles an hour to cover all the streets of London on foot"; "What it would take now goodness knows," he adds, "A thousand likely" (*Return* 171). From this terrifying agoraphobic image, which evokes an inexhaustibly labyrinthine city, Ford infers an existential lesson he claims should be the first that artists learn, namely "that you are merely an atom among vastnesses and shouldn't take yourself very seriously" (*Return* 171). This vision of an atom among vastnesses shapes a number of his poems from the early 1900s, several of which have rural rather than urban settings. "On a Marsh Road", for example, from *The Face of the Night* (1904), evokes "infinite, glimpsing distances" and "eternal silences"; "infinite plains [which] know no wanderer's foot" and "infinite distances where alone is rest" (Ford, *Poems* 35). Ford's sense of isolation and insignificance does however seem to stem in particular from an alienated, psychopathological relationship to the streets of the metropolis. "When you get out of the Paris train at Charing Cross," he comments, it feels as if you sink down like a plummet into dim depths and were at once lost to sight" (*Return* 230).

Certainly, the distinctly odd incident that seems in 1904 to have triggered Ford's agoraphobia, an incident in which superstitious and phobic behaviour are almost indissociable, is irreducibly urban. This is the first and most significant of the examples of poor luck that Ford offers in *Return to Yesterday*. He explains that he had given Elsie an opal ring, and that for some reason they both became convinced that this opal was the cause of the series of disasters that befell them, including the most recent, his daughter's distinctly Gothic domestic accident. He then explains that, having tried and failed to dispose of it in several improvised rites, he finally decided to neutralise its supernatural force by disposing of it in running water, through which, so he claims, witchcraft "cannot operate" (*Return* 227). He therefore sets out for the Thames at Hammersmith Bridge with the stone in his pocket: "At once an indescribable lassitude fell on me. I was almost unable to drag my legs along and quite incapable of getting to the Thames" (*Return* 227). He thinks of dropping the opal through a grating in the pavement, but meets a policeman every time he encounters one, and consequently fears being accused of disposing of stolen property.

The next day he decides to send the opal to a convent as a donation, having first explained to the Mother Superior about its malignant properties; but in taking it to the post office he finds himself "almost completely unable to walk". "I could hardly drag my feet along," he writes (*Return* 227-8).

Ford derives a rather curious moral from this incident; one that, suspiciously perhaps, occludes its specifically spatial aspects. He claims that, if a novelist is superstitious, he will be at one with the ordinary people he represents in his fiction: "A novelist had better share the superstitions of, than high-hat, humanity" (*Return* 228). "Superstitions, belief in luck, premonitions," he emphasises, "play such a great part in human motives that a novelist who does not to some extent enter into those feelings can hardly understand and will certainly be unable to render to perfection most human affairs" (*Return* 229). Ford's covertly elitist claim, then, is that a superstitious state of mind, to the precise extent that it is a common, if not collective mentality, provides an effective means of identifying with the masses. He repeats an odd anecdote in support of this asseveration:

I remember once dreadfully shocking Mr Edward Garnett. It was at the time when Limpsfield was disturbed by my wearing a cloth cap. I said it was my ambition to pass unobserved in a crowd. Mr Garnett never forgot that. Years after he advanced it against me as proof of my bourgeois nature.

And indeed it is so. Yet the novelist must pass unobserved in the crowd if he himself is to observe. And the crowd is his clay, of his observations of it he will build his monuments to humanity. The social reformer may – and usually does – render himself conspicuous by singular garments that express his singular personality. It does not matter how humanity reacts towards him. He will make capital out of persecution.

But the first thing the novelist has to learn is self-effacement – the first and that always. (*Return* 228)

This ambition to pass unobserved in a crowd in order to observe it, is a characteristic of the Baudelairean *flâneur*, perhaps the most celebrated modernist archetype of the artist. In his description of his friend Constantin Guys in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Charles Baudelaire had insisted that the "passion" and "profession" of the *flâneur* is "to become one flesh with the crowd, among "the fleeting and the infinite" (Baudelaire 9). He continues: "To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define" (Baudelaire 9). Ford dreams, then, of being a *flâneur* of the kind described by Baudelaire; but, as an agoraphobic, he is congenitally, and almost comically, ill-equipped to perform the role. For the agoraphobic is in effect the antitype of the *flâneur*. In his famous commentary on the poetics of urban space in Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin states that "the street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls" (Benjamin 37). An agoraphobic could not be less at home on the street. The spaces of the metropolis are profoundly alien to an individual, like Ford, whose movement is pathologically inhibited.

"You are to remember," Ford had reminded his reader in a previous chapter of the autobiography, "that my chief trouble was that I imagined that I could not walk"

(*Return* 206). The paragraphs cited above suppress the implications of this admission for the urban aesthetic that he is ostensibly outlining. He implies there that being at one with the common people whom the contemporary novelist must represent is simply a matter of putting on a proletarian cap. He assumes that it is impossible to 'high-hat' humanity if one is inconspicuous. A cloth cap, like Perseus's cap, he hopes, makes its wearer magically disappear in the metropolis. Ford is in fact concealing the extent to which his spatial phobia shaped his impressionist aesthetic. For in representing the modern metropolis and its 'human affairs' Ford is forced into a compromise. He must attempt to grasp the dialectic of the fleeting and the infinite characteristic of modernity, as Baudelaire's example demands, but he is in practice capable of doing so only from outside the urban crowd that embodies it. This is a painful paradox for the ambitious modernist artist to find himself trapped in. He cannot be at the very centre of the world and at the same time unseen of the world. And it is in part because he cannot inhabit "the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life", as Baudelaire put it, that Ford's perception, his peculiar consciousness, is of paramount importance to his aesthetic (Baudelaire 10). His impressionism, then, is among other things the product of his inability to participate in the life he is committed to representing. It is a half-vicarious means of experiencing the modernity that he is forced to observe from the margins of the city. According to Adam Phillips, a phobia acts as an "unconscious estrangement technique" because it constitutes the phobic object as an alien phenomenon (Phillips 16). Ford's agoraphobia estranges him from the life of the city, it might be concluded, because he cannot spontaneously or un-self-consciously participate in it.

Max Saunders has suggested that Granger, the narrator of *The Inheritors* (1901), a political romance co-authored by Conrad and Ford, is the latter's "first fictional agoraphobic" (Saunders 132). Saunders is presumably thinking of descriptions like this one from Chapter 5, in which Granger steps out into the city at night:

All around me stretched an immense town – an immense blackness. People – thousands of people hurried past me [–] had errands, had aims, had others to talk to, to trifle with. But I had nobody. This immense city, this immense blackness, had no interiors for me. There were house fronts, staring windows, closed doors, but nothing within: no rooms, no hollow places. (Conrad and Ford 35)

Saunders's insight is persuasive. So is Trotter's characteristically sophisticated reading of Chapter 6 of *Some Do Not...* (1924), the first volume of Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End*, specifically the incident in which Tietjens, Ford's protagonist, suffers a sudden agoraphobic attack on a road in the countryside (Trotter 471-2). But if Granger is Ford's first agoraphobic character, and Tietjens his last, then *The Soul of London*, his most direct attempt to represent metropolitan modernity, is probably the first of his books to be shaped throughout by an agoraphobic aesthetic. It was after all composed at the time of his most acute phobic attack. Indeed, it is tempting to propose that, in its calculated refusal to be "encyclopaedic, topographical, or archaeological" in its approach to the capital, it is his first agoraphobic fiction (Ford, *Soul* 3). The first chapter of *The Soul of London*, "From a Distance", captures the book's agoraphobic aesthetic from the opening. "Thought of from sufficiently far," Ford begins, "London offers to the mind's eye singularly little of a picture" (*Soul* 7). London is not a unified

phenomenon; it is instead comprised of the infinitely different perspectives with which individuals apprehend it: "It remains in the end always a matter of approaches" (*Soul* 7). It depends, he argues, on one's preconceptions, and on the point at which one enters the city, and innumerable other contingencies. It is impossible to gain a general impression of London, and for the provincial visiting it for the first time, for example, "the dominant note of his first impression will be that of his own aloneness" (*Soul* 9).

London is, according to Ford, "essentially a background, a matter so much more of masses than of individuals" (*Soul* 11). The individual that he subsequently idealised in *Return to Yesterday*, the suave novelist who actively dissolves his identity in the masses, is notably absent from this account of the metropolis. Instead, the urban subject that is implicitly constructed in *The Soul of London* is far more fearful of what Ford identifies as the "assimilative powers" of the city, its vast, indiscriminate appetite for effacing social and racial difference (*Soul* 13). London is a sublime phenomenon, and Ford's urban subject is almost completely overwhelmed by the fact that, "if in its tolerance it finds a place for all eccentricities of physiognomy, of costume, of cult, it does so because it crushes out and floods over the significance of those eccentricities" (*Soul* 12). "It is one gigantic pantheon of the dead level of democracy," he concludes (*Soul* 12). In the context of this account, in which to pass unobserved in the city is by implication to capitulate to its death-like levelling of individuality, it seems positively defensive to ascribe London the identity of "an incomparable background" (*Soul* 22).

In representing the metropolis as a background Ford is engaged in a deliberate act of repression. He is stepping back from it, and pushing it to the edges of his consciousness, like an agoraphobic cautiously retreating from a curb as he stands beside a chaotic road. Symptomatically, the vision of the city evoked by Ford in this book is often tangential or marginal to the life of its streets. For example, in the first chapter he describes an archetypal man looking down "out of dim windows upon the slaty, black, wet misery of a squalid street" (*Soul* 22). And in the second chapter, he recalls the experience of arriving in London by train, which presents the capital as a series of unconnected glimpses, as "so many bits of uncompleted life": "I looked down upon black and tiny yards that were like the cells in an electric battery" (*Soul* 42). Far from being immersed in the mass of people, Ford's melancholic narrator is typically detached from it. This is the aesthetic of someone who loves the city but must preserve a safe distance from the life of its streets in order to protect his sense of identity. It is an impressionist aesthetic, shaped by the contradictory imperative both to embrace the metropolis and to repudiate its oppressive advances. Ford's attempt to apprehend London in prose cannot in short be separated from the agoraphobic impulses that he was combating at the time of this book's composition.

Ford did half-overcome his agoraphobia. In *Return to Yesterday*, he recalls that, soon after his return from Germany in 1904, Conrad forced him to see a doctor called Tebb. Ford asked this man whether he thought it advisable, given his medical condition, to finish the biography of Holbein he had begun; and the doctor peremptorily informed him that, since he would undoubtedly be dead in a month, he might as well attempt it. According to Ford's triumphant account of this incident, the instant Tebb departed he dressed himself and leapt into a hansom cab that took him to Piccadilly Circus:

You are to remember that my chief trouble was that I imagined that I could not walk. Well, I walked backwards and forwards across the Circus for an hour and a half. I kept saying: 'Damn the brute. I will not be dead in a month.' And walking across the Circus through the traffic was no joke. Motors are comparatively controllable but the traffic then was mostly horse-drawn and horses in motion are much more difficult to check than automobiles. (*Return* 206-7)

Ford makes no further comment, but the reader is obviously intended to infer that, thanks to this cathartic treatment, he successfully cured himself. His condition unquestionably improved. From roughly 1906 to 1914, as he proudly reports in the final part of *Return to Yesterday*, "The Last of London", he even became something of a *flâneur* – as if he continued to feel the need to demonstrate, in the most performative terms possible, that he was not an agoraphobic. "You are to think of me then as rather a dandy," he tells the reader (*Return* 270). He describes himself at this time issuing from the door of his London apartment wearing "a very long morning-coat, a perfectly immaculate high hat, lavender trousers, a near-Gladstone collar and a black satin frock", and carrying "a malacca cane with a gold knob" (*Return* 270). Note that the cloth cap has been silently replaced by the high hat. "As often as not," he adds, "I should be followed by a Great Dane" (*Return* 270). This dog – like the tortoises that, according to the legend that Benjamin loved, accompanied the most fashionable Parisian *flâneurs* in the 1840s – was obviously intended to be a dandiacal accessory. One suspects that it also acted as one of those props that agoraphobics habitually employ to help them to negotiate the terrifying open spaces of the metropolis. Freud, for example, among other psychologists, observed that agoraphobics "feel protected if they are accompanied by an acquaintance or followed by a vehicle, and so on" (Freud 310). Ford had finally found a performance that, as Trotter puts it in his discussion of Tietjens' agoraphobic incident, "enable[d] him to out-manoeuvre his anxiety" (Trotter 471).

Ford nonetheless remained haunted by his agoraphobic experiences. The "Coda" to *Return to Yesterday*, in which Ford describes Britain in 1914, revisits Piccadilly Circus, the scene of his therapeutic triumph a decade before. In this setting, Ford consciously or unconsciously uses an autobiographical image that is manifestly agoraphobic in order to explore a sense of imminent social cataclysm. Standing "on the edge of the kerb" on June 28th, the date on which Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated, he confronts a Circus that is "blocked and blocked and blocked again with vehicles" (*Return* 311). "I did not know it but I was taking my last look at the city – as a Londoner", he writes; "And yet perhaps I did know it" (*Return* 311). The kerb on which he stands symbolises clearly enough the brink of war. "I was feeling free and as it were without weight," he states, as if experiencing the vertiginous euphoria of a sudden suicidal impulse (*Return* 317). Later in the coda, after discussing his association with the Vorticists, he modifies the image slightly: "So I stood on the kerb in the Circus and felt adrift" (*Return* 317). Ford's hesitation on the pavement thus stands in for a global paralysis. Piccadilly Circus implicitly opens up onto the terrifying expanses of the battlefields of France. He finally comes to terms with his phobia, then, by universalizing it as an historical condition. Ford's agoraphobia and the mania that besets the entire habitable globe are one.

Notes

1. Ford seems to have found it difficult to comprehend emotional states in abstraction from space. In his Preface to *The Left Bank* (1927), a collection of short stories by Jean Rhys, he admiringly complains that she refused to take his advice and introduce a sense of topography to her fiction: 'With cold deliberation, once her attention was called to the matter, she eliminated even such two or three words of descriptive matter as had crept into her work. Her business was with passion, hardship, emotions: the locality in which these things are endured was immaterial' (cited in Thacker 209). In Ford, locality is always of material importance.

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